

Brainstorming Session Guidelines

Purpose

The purpose of this tool is to provide a framework for conducting brainstorming sessions with executives or employees during the information gathering and solution development phases of a project.

The objective of a brainstorming session is to allow for the free exchange of ideas and to develop a prioritized list of ideas for further review. The Executive Brainstorming Session will focus on high-level, high-impact issues/solutions. The Employee Brainstorming Session will focus on detail-level issues/solutions.

The following conditions may indicate the need for a brainstorming session with executives:

- When the Project Team needs to gain consensus on issues or possible solutions with the executive group before moving forward in the project.
- When limited time is available to conduct one-on-one interviews with executives.
- When the entire Project Team needs to gain exposure to the executives and begin forming relationships.
- When solutions and possible recommendations are becoming evident early in the fact-finding process. Confirmation of these by group consensus can minimize the number of interviews and questionnaires that are needed.

The following conditions may indicate the need for a brainstorming session with employees:

- When the Project Team needs to get as many issues on the table in a short period of time, or when there is limited time available to do one-on-one interviews. Gathering several employees together to generate a list of detailed issues is less time consuming and may be a more effective way to generate a complete list of issues.
- When there seems to be varying opinions on issues. Holding a brainstorming session will expose a group of employees to these opinions and may be a way of gaining consensus more easily.
- When potential issues or solutions need to be confirmed. Confirmation of these by group consensus can minimize the number of interviews and questionnaires that are needed.

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Tips for Effective Brainstorming Sessions:

1. Post the problems or issues that is being addressed and the goals or objectives of the session where everyone in the room can see them. Ensure that everyone is clear on the topic being explored.

Note: Brainstorming sessions may or may not have an agenda, but should always have a goal or objective. See the template section below for a sample agenda. If an agenda is used, it should include the topic areas to be explored and the expected outcomes. A sample agenda may include:

- Objectives
- Discussion Items
- Discussion Process
- Session Rules
- Brainstorming Exercise
- Next Steps

2. Inform the participants of how long the session is expected to last.

3. Post the following brainstorming rules on a flipchart:

- All ideas are welcome
- No answer is wrong
- Never criticize
- Think creatively
- Quantity is desirable
- Everyone participates
- Maintain an open mind
- The group owns the ideas, not individuals

4. Solicit contributions and record ideas on a flipchart. The following techniques may be helpful in generating ideas:

- Ask each member to write an idea or two on a card to encourage participation and avoid start-up debates. Collect the cards and transcribe the ideas on a flipchart. Build on the ideas once they are captured on the flipchart.
- Write the problem at the top of several sheets of paper. Each member of the group writes an idea on a sheet and passes it on to the next person. After a few rounds the session leader asks for the ideas to be read aloud. This approach allows people to build on each other's ideas and avoids confrontation between members of the group.
- Title flipcharts with themes and ask participants to write their ideas on the appropriate flipchart (or facilitate the ideas from them) until the group is out of ideas.

5. Lead a discussion of the ideas that have been posted. If the brainstorming session generated solutions, note the pros and cons of each idea and establish the most viable ones. Some initial qualities to look for when examining the responses include:

- Answers that are repeated or similar
- Grouping like concepts together

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- Eliminate responses that obviously do not fit
 - If the discussion is solution focused, the Engagement Team may be required to establish a short list of evaluation criteria, such as:
 - Does the solution address the issue?
 - Is the cost of the solution reasonable?
6. During the brainstorming session ensure that adequate time is given to explore all of the possible issues or solutions rather than spending too much time on one idea.

Invitation to the Brainstorming Session

The invitation should be customized to include the appropriate information related to the engagement. When developing an invitation for the session, consider the following:

- Keep the invitation to one page in length
- Clarify with the Project Sponsor the best method for delivering the invitation
- For executives, it may be appropriate to indicate two to three options for dates and ask the executives to respond by indicating what works best for them
- Forward the memo to the appropriate audience in hard copy or by e-mail at least one week prior to the session